

P.O. Box 488  
Fairfield, MT 59436

January, 11 2007

To Whom It May Concern:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) is proposing to purchase a conservation easement from Judith Williams. The proposed property is 432 acres, lies approximately 10 miles north of Wolf Creek in Lewis and Clark County and is situated east and adjacent to State Highway 434. The Williams acreage lies between two parcels of separate conservation easement lands (north and south of the Deadman Coulee Road).

The easement is being proposed to conserve parts of elk and mule deer winter range as well as other native wildlife habitats linked to intermountain grassland habitat. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks would like to purchase the easement and implement the easement terms while maintaining the present private use of the ranch.

The easement terms are generalized in the enclosed Environmental Assessment. A Socio-Economic Report, Management Plan and Grazing Plan have also been provided for your review. The comment period will be open through February 16, 2007.

Please send any written comments to the following address:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Attn: Williams Ranch Conservation Easement  
P.O. Box 488  
Fairfield, MT 59436

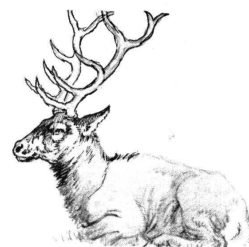
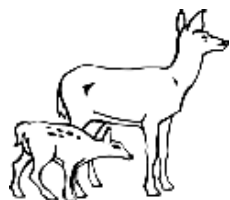
A public hearing on this proposed easement will be held at the Dearborn Community Center on Highway 434 (between highway 200 and Wolf Creek) on Wednesday, January 31, 2007 at 6:00 p.m.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti  
Regional Supervisor  
Great Falls, MT

# *Williams Ranch*

## Conservation Easement



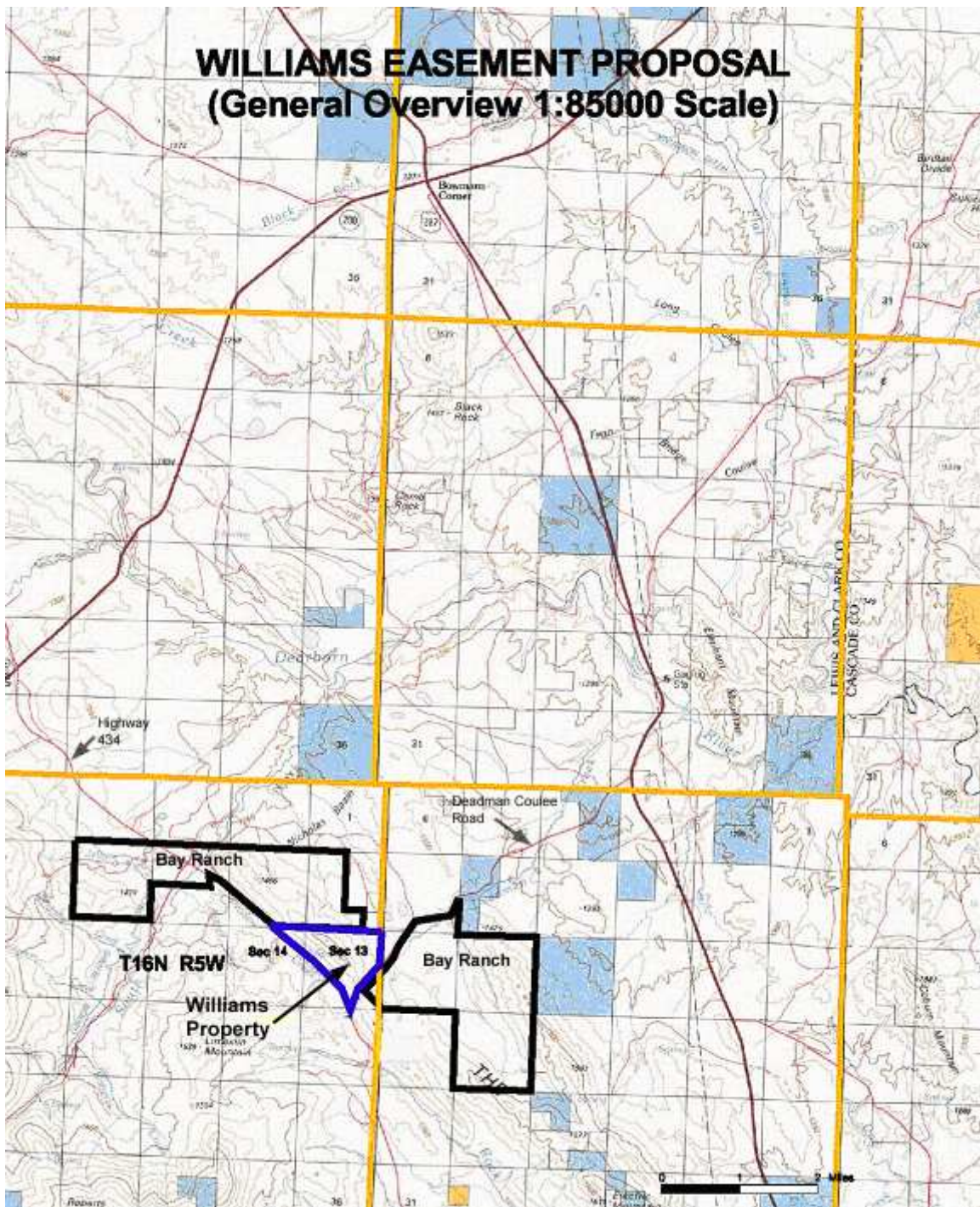
- Environmental Assessment
  - Management/Grazing Plan
  - Socio-economic Assessment



*Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks*



January 2007



Area map of Williams Ranch and bordering Bay Ranch Conservation Easements.

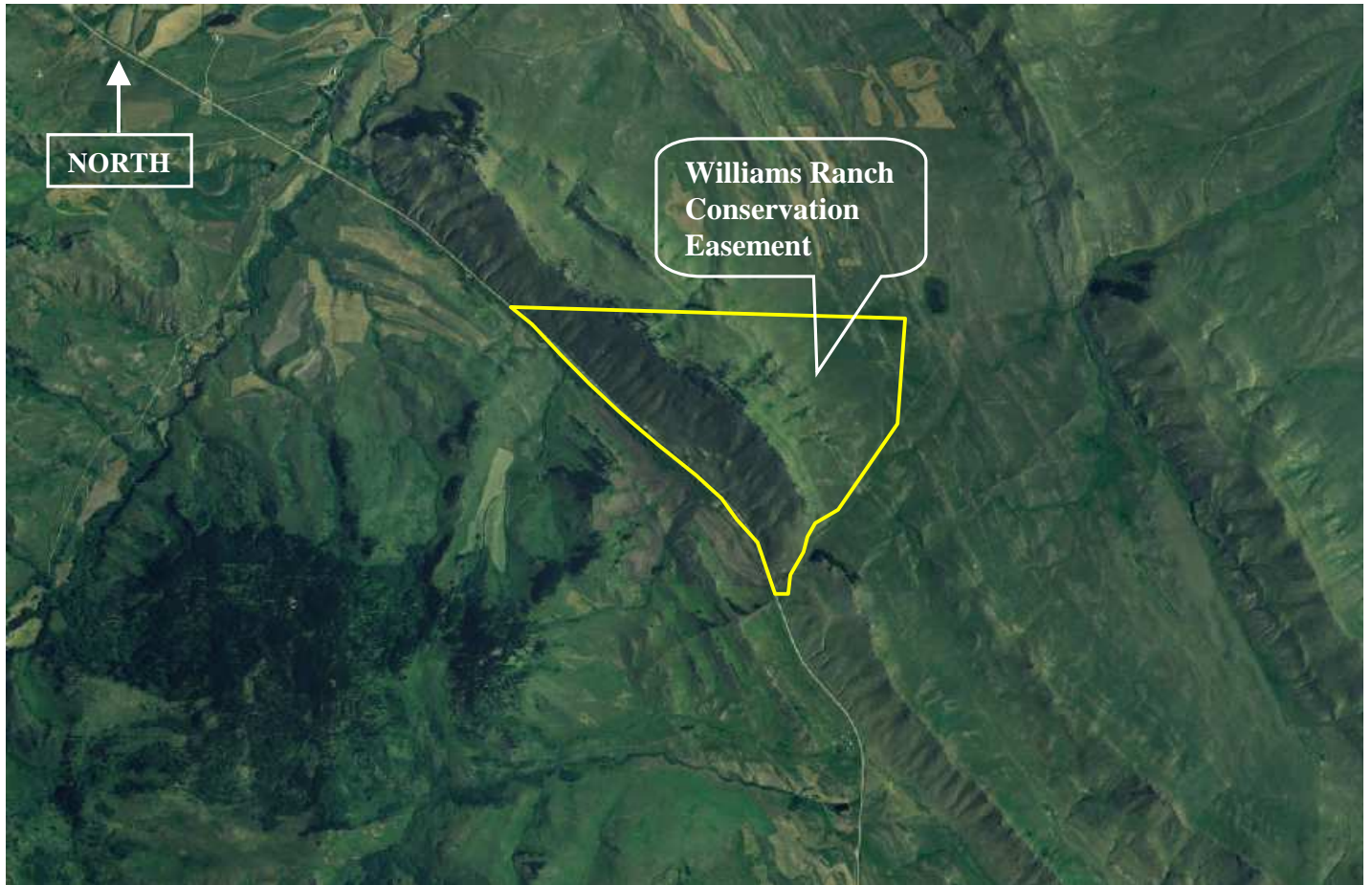


Figure 1. Aerial view of the Williams Ranch Conservation Easement property line. Highway 434 forms the western boundary of the Williams Ranch Conservation Easement.

## **Wildlife Division**

### **Draft Environmental Assessment**

#### **WILLIAMS RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT**

##### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Habitat Montana (see Paragraph II. Authority and Direction) recognizes that certain native plant communities constituting wildlife habitat are worthy of perpetual conservation. Those communities include intermountain grassland habitat. The Williams ranch is within the intermountain grassland habitat zone. This habitat type, dominated by rough fescue (*Festuca scabrella*) in its climax state, is specifically targeted by Habitat Montana (see definition below) for its statewide contribution to wintering ungulates and for its vulnerability and attractiveness to development. The primary wildlife use of this habitat includes but is not limited to year-round use by mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and, to a lesser degree, elk (*Cervus elaphus*). No residences, sheds or other structures beyond fencing and spring improvements are on these acres. A conservation easement was offered to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) by the Williams ranch. The purpose of the Williams ranch conservation easement is to preserve this habitat and wildlife presence as well as the private ownership. In a direct, adjacent, and connecting addition to perpetually conserved lands, these 432 acres will be in addition to the separate 3869 acres already within the Bay ranch conservation easement held by FWP. Additionally, increased guaranteed public hunting access will be ensured in a hunting district dominated by private land with minimal public opportunity and abundant elk. Given its location, habitat and wildlife use similarities with the Bay ranch conservation easement lands, these easement terms and price shall closely parallel, but clearly be separate to those.

##### **II. AUTHORITY AND DIRECTION**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has the authority under law (MCA 87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement or fee title acquisition (87-1-241 and 242). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana Program. As with other FWP property interest proposals, the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission must approve any easement acquisition proposed by the agency. In addition, the Montana Board of Land Commissioners is also required to review and approve the Department's proposal for this conservation easement acquisition because this action is larger than 100 acres. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

##### **III. LOCATION OF PROJECT**

The Williams ranch constitutes 432 acres of ranch property addressed by this easement (the entire ranch is not proposed to be placed under conservation easement) and lies approximately 10 miles north of Wolf Creek, Montana and is situated east and adjacent to

State Highway 434 (see map, Figure 1.). The Williams acreage lies between two parcels of the separate Bay Ranch conservation easement lands (north and south of the Deadman Coulee Road) in Deer/Elk/Lion hunting district 423. Contiguous with the Bay property, it is similarly dominated by the same north-south ridge system (The Reef) with the primary ground cover being open grasslands punctuated by limited and scattered pockets of primarily Douglas fir timber (see photo, front cover).

#### **IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION**

The habitat represented on the Williams property primarily includes intermountain grassland. By maintaining existing habitat acreage and quality, wildlife use including wintering mule deer and elk, will be perpetuated. Other wildlife wholly or partially dependent upon habitats represented on the Williams ranch include sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), antelope (*Antilocapra americana*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*) and other game and non-game species affiliated with these habitats.

A secondary result of this project is guaranteed public hunting access. Guaranteed public hunting access on the Williams ranch will offer hunting opportunity in an area where access has been and continues to be very limited. Additionally, while there are currently no public lands adjacent to the Williams property, as previously noted the property does connect two parcels of the separate Bay ranch conservation easement lands. However, permission to cross property boundaries for hunting purposes will only be granted by the property owner.

The need for this project is not established merely by habitats or wildlife use. Rather, the need is linked to threats directed towards those native habitats. These threats manifest themselves as residential subdivision, excessive livestock use, sodbusting of native range and associated detriments such as noxious weed encroachment and increased wildlife disturbance and removal. This threat level is evident locally and on a statewide basis. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has determined that intermountain grassland and riparian habitats have and continue to receive the brunt of residential subdivision development across the state. The Roger's pass area to the west, the Wolf Creek drainage to the southwest and the Birdtail Hills to the east have all experienced significant declines in habitat continuity due almost entirely to residential subdivision development. Acreage within the Williams property clearly possesses similar home site marketability. Livestock use including adequate considerations for ground nesting game and non-game birds and limited sodbusting is compatible with agricultural production but is not always firmly established in farm and ranch operations. This project would ensure sound practices across time and with future landowners.

#### **V. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The proposed action is for MFWP to purchase, hold and monitor a conservation easement on a portion of the Williams Ranch. This easement would include 432 acres of the ranch, which is entirely deeded Williams Ranch property.

Specific terms of the easement in their entirety are contained in a separate legal document, which is the "Deed of Conservation Easement". This document lists MFWP and landowner rights

under the terms of the easement as well as restrictions on landowner activities. The rights of both parties and restrictions on landowner activities were negotiated with and agreed to by MFWP and the landowner. The intent of these rights and restrictions is to preserve important wildlife habitats in perpetuity while maintaining agricultural and other uses of the Williams property.

To summarize the terms of the easement, MFWP's rights include: (1) The right to identify, preserve and enhance specific habitats; (2) The right to monitor and enforce restrictions; (3) The right to prevent activities inconsistent with purpose of the easement; (4) The right to provide for public hunting and wildlife viewing access, which includes (a) walk-in public access, (b) access to hunting all legal game animals of any age/sex classes in accordance with MFWP's adopted hunting regulations, and (c) allowing two or more hunting parties (less than or equal to three persons each, allowing at least 150 hunter days per year) from the beginning of the upland game bird season to end of the upland game bird hunting season each year.

Landowners' retained rights include: (1) The right to raise, pasture and graze livestock in accordance with the agreed-to rest-rotation grazing plan; (2) The right to regulate public use of the land at all times, subject to the public access opportunities secured within this easement; (3) The right to develop and maintain water resources without significantly disturbing and/or altering wildlife and associated habitats; (4) The right to construct, remove, maintain, renovate, repair or replace fences and other improvements necessary for generally accepted land management purposes, provided, however that wildlife use is not excessively inhibited; (5) The right to remove, maintain, repair, or replace roads, provided, however that wildlife use is not excessively inhibited; (6) The right to use agrichemicals for the control of noxious weeds; (7) The right to use motor vehicles and ranching equipment in the ordinary course of landowner's business, but only in a manner that does not substantially impact vegetation or the natural habitat of animal species; (8) The right to explore for, develop and extract oil and gas, including the right to place and maintain associated structures, including pipelines, drilling and pumping rigs and pump houses. However, surface mining is prohibited and sub-surface mining may be allowed if a plan is submitted that provides for minimal adverse impacts.

Restrictions placed upon the landowners' activities include: (1) no removal, control or manipulation of sagebrush by any means; (2) subdivision of the land for any purpose and in any manner is prohibited; (3) no removal of timber except to gather firewood for landowners' personal use; (4) no new cultivation or farming of the native rangelands shall occur on the land; (5) no outfitting or fee hunting; (6) all agricultural activities must be carried out in a manner so as to not degrade soil and water composition, structure and productivity; (7) no utility installation (e.g., gas pipe lines or utility lines); (8) no surface or sub-surface mining except that gravel and rock may be extracted for use on the property; (9) the construction or placement of any structure, building or improvement of any kind upon the land is prohibited, other than expressly allowed in this easement; (10) the establishment or maintenance of any commercial feedlot is prohibited; (11) no game farms (any form); (12) no commercial or industrial use of or activity on the land; (13) no refuse dumping.

## **VI. DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION**

The Williams property owner initiated the conservation easement process and at no point expressed interest in sale of fee title or a long-term lease. Since conservation easements are also MFWP's preferred option, the only other reasonable alternative considered in this environmental assessment is the "No Action Alternative".

### **1. No Action Alternative**

FWP considered the alternative of taking no action. Under the "No Action Alternative" the Williams Ranch would continue to be managed as in the past but there would be no guarantee of the preservation of current wildlife habitat, open space and recreation values and other resources as they are found on the ranch. Specifically, without the proposed easement, these resources are vulnerable to future residential subdivision, sodbusting, improper livestock grazing, commercial feedlots and surface mining. These activities would likely result in decreased habitat quantity and quality and wildlife use. The magnitude of these and other potential impacts to this and adjacent physical and human environments are difficult to measure due to the uncertainty of future events. There is no guaranteed public access to the ranch without this easement.

## **VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Through prevention of certain identified activities, this conservation easement will legally maintain or improve existing habitats in perpetuity. Impacts associated with this proposed action shall be determined only as they apply to current resource ownership, uses and conditions. Under the no action alternative, resource ownership, uses and conditions may or may not change. Consequently, impacts associated with the no action alternative are unknown.

### **1. Land Resources**

Impact of proposed action: No negative impact would occur as a result of this proposal. The terms of the proposed easement are structured to prevent adverse impacts on soils and vegetation. Subdivision and development of the land is restricted, as is additional cultivation of native plant communities. The proposed easement will ensure that land resources are maintained and/or enhanced into perpetuity.

No Action alternative: Unknown.

### **2. Air Resources**

Impact of proposed action: The proposed action would likely result in a net reduction in potential future risks to air and water quality on the subject lands, compared to no action. Possibilities for residential, commercial, and industrial developments would be reduced and restricted across the subject land.

No action alternative: Unknown.

### **3. Water Resources**

Impact of proposed action: There would be no impact in perpetuity over what is currently associated with a working livestock and farming operation. Current agricultural uses on the property have proven to be generally compatible with maintenance of water quality. The proposed easement will ensure that water resources are maintained.

No action alternative: Unknown.

#### **4. Vegetation Resources**

Impact of proposed action: Minor impact. The quality of rangeland on the Williams ranch is generally good. Because of this current good condition, range vegetation improvements will likely be minor in overall magnitude. The prescribed grazing program will allow and foster native grass establishment, recovery and maintenance on all sites within the pasture system.

No action alternative: Unknown.

#### **5. Fish/Wildlife Resources**

Impact of proposed action: Minor impact. As good quality habitat currently exists on the Williams ranch, realized fish and wildlife benefits will likely be minor in overall magnitude. Anticipated habitat enhancements include consistent forage for elk and cover for ground nesting birds. The prescribed grazing program, with acreage dedicated to yearlong grazing rest periods, will directly benefit these species and others. Wildlife response may be measured as increased presence on the Williams property due to seasonal distribution changes or increased numbers.

No action alternative: Unknown.

#### **6. Adjacent Land**

Impact of proposed action: No impact.

No action alternative: Unknown.

### **VIII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT**

Through prevention of certain identified activities, this conservation easement will legally maintain and/or improve existing habitats in perpetuity. Impacts associated with this proposed action shall be determined only as they apply to current resource ownership, uses and conditions. Under the No action alternative, resource ownership, uses and conditions may or may not change. Consequently, impacts associated with the No action alternative are unknown.

#### **1. Noise/Electrical Effects**

Impact of proposed action: No impact would occur over existing conditions.

No action alternative: Unknown.

## **2. Land Use**

Impact of proposed action: No impact. The implementation of a rest-rotation grazing program influences the method of use but does not impact the type of land use.

No action alternative: Unknown.

## **3. Risk/Health Hazards**

Impact of proposed action: No impact.

No action alternative: Unknown.

## **4. Neighboring Landowners and Local Community Impacts**

Refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

## **5. Public Services/Taxes/Utilities**

Property owner will pay taxes and utilities. For additional analysis of impacts on the human environment refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment.

## **6. Aesthetics/Recreation**

Impact of proposed action: Minor impact. Guaranteed public hunting access will increase recreational opportunity in this area.

No action alternative: Unknown.

## **7. Cultural/Historic Resources**

Impact of proposed action: No impact.

No action alternative: Unknown.

## **8. Socio-Economic Assessment**

Refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

## **9. Adjacent Landowners**

Impact of proposed action: No impact.

No action alternative: Unknown.

# **IX. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE**

The proposed action has no significant effects on current conditions. It cannot be definitively determined what, if any, effects result from the No action alternative.

**X. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

Based on the above assessment, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and an Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of review.

**XI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Formal public participation specific to MFWP's proposed purchase of this conservation easement will begin with the availability of this draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review and comment for a one-month period. The availability of this EA for public review will be advertised in the local and statewide media, and a copy of the draft EA will be mailed to all parties who indicate an interest in this proposal. The public review period will be from January 15 through February 16, 2007. A public hearing will be held at the Dearborn Community Center on January 31, 2007 at 6:00 P.M. After reviewing public input received on or before February 16, 2007, FWP will decide upon a preferred alternative. The Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and State Board of Land Commissioners will be asked to render final decisions on this proposal at their regularly scheduled meetings in March 2007.

Comments should be addressed to:

Brent N. Lonner, wildlife biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, P.O. Box 488, Fairfield, MT 59436, (406) 467-2488, blonner@mt.gov

Comments must be postmarked no later than February 16, 2007 to ensure their consideration in the decision-making process.

**XII. NAME OF PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR PREPARING EA**

Brent N. Lonner, wildlife biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, P. O. Box 488, Fairfield, MT 59436, (406) 467-2488.

Quentin Kujala, wildlife biologist, Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, 1420 E. 6<sup>th</sup> Ave., P. O Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701, (406) 444-5672.

**Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Wildlife Division**

**Draft Management/Grazing Plan**

**WILLIAMS RANCH CONSERVATION EASEMENT**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The Williams ranch has primarily intermountain grassland habitat represented on the property. The primary wildlife use of this habitat is elk and mule deer winter range although the property provides seasonal or year-round habitat for other species including sharp-tailed grouse, white-tailed deer and antelope. The Habitat Montana program specifically targets intermountain grassland habitat. Under House Bill 526, this program utilizes funds generated from hunting license fees to purchase appropriate conservation easements. The purpose of the Williams ranch conservation easement is to preserve this habitat and wildlife use while maintaining private ownership and use of the property. Additionally, guaranteed public access will be ensured.

**II. GOAL, OBJECTIVES, CONCERNS AND STRATEGIES**

**GOAL:** By implementation of FWP easement terms, the quality and amounts of native habitats, important agricultural habitats and wildlife potential currently found on the Williams Ranch property shall be maintained without displacing private land use. Under the same Easement terms, a secondary goal is to provide guaranteed public hunting access and opportunity. This shall be accomplished with minimal impact to this and adjacent physical and human environments. A third goal is to apply a rotational grazing system on the ranch to maintain and/or enhance existing vegetative communities. This shall be accomplished by implementation of a grazing management plan.

**Objective 1:** Manage the grassland vegetation to meet the twin objectives of maintaining and improving wildlife habitat and domestic livestock use. This shall include water quality.

While this property is certainly capable of sustaining livestock use under sound management practices, unregulated, continual or excessive livestock use has the ability to reduce habitat quality with corresponding wildlife use/number reductions or displacements. Reduced habitat quality often reduces agricultural grazing potential as well.

To perpetually define and ensure sound grazing practices across time and landowners, this easement establishes a rest-rotation system on the entire acreage covered by the easement. For term definitions and seasons of use, see the attached grazing plan. Compliance with pasture open and close dates will be evaluated. The Department shall routinely meet with the Landowner to discuss grazing plan specifics and evaluation. Land maintenance, including but not limited to fence and water development construction and repair, noxious weed control and necessary road construction and repair, shall be the responsibility of the

landowner

**Objective 2:** Maintain wildlife use potential of the property.

Some land practices and management actions may be detrimental to the short or long term presence of and use by wildlife. As per easement condition, woven wire fences and other similarly impenetrable wildlife barriers or impacting structures will not be placed on the property. Easement terms defining acceptable practices are intended to maintain habitat and the potential for wildlife use of that habitat as it occurs on the Williams property.

**Objective 3:** Provide guaranteed public hunting access and opportunity.

Fairly allocated and reasonable access opportunities can be difficult to communicate, establish and maintain. There shall be some mechanism for the general public to access and hunt the Williams property up to that level addressed by easement terms {allowing  $\geq$  two hunting parties ( $\leq$  three persons each) from Oct. 1 to end of the big game general hunting season each year}. Such mechanism shall be made known to the general public and may include telephone or site visit reservation, sign-in box, map production and appropriate boundary signing. Hunters will have the opportunity to hunt all legal game animals in accordance with MFWP's adopted hunting regulations. Walk-in access shall originate from sufficient existing public roads and right-of-ways. Hunters accessing the adjacent Bay Ranch easement property will also have access to the Williams property. There will also be some mechanism (permission slips, sign-in rosters or equally effective method) to tally and document hunter use.

### **III. BASELINE EASEMENT COMPLIANCE**

A baseline inventory will be conducted and used to document the status/condition of the entire property at the time of easement purchase. This shall be used across time and landowners to assess easement and management/grazing plan effectiveness and compliance.

The Department or its agents will visit the property in a timely fashion to monitor compliance with all easement and management/grazing plan stipulations and to minimize the potential for noncompliance.

### **IV. GRAZING PLAN**

Livestock may be grazed in the Williams ranch conservation easement pasture (Figure 2) and livestock grazing must follow the grazing rotation schedule in Table 1. The stocking rate is at the landowner's discretion with this exception: a maximum of 4 horses will be allowed to graze the Williams ranch pasture in conjunction with other livestock provided for in the grazing system within the prescribed dates described in Table 1. While the stocking rate is at the landowner's discretion, all grazing must be limited to the scheduled dates for a particular year. When a pasture receives the B grazing treatment, all livestock (except for up to 4 horses) will be removed from the grazing system pasture as scheduled. In the year the pasture receives the B treatment, the horses may remain in the pasture until March 31 of the following calendar year. Horse pasturing provisions are exclusive; no substitution or replacement for other livestock classes is permitted. When the pasture receives the C

grazing treatment the pasture is rested with no livestock of any kind allowed for grazing purposes. When the pasture is scheduled for the A grazing treatment, livestock will be placed in the pasture in mid to late June (when landowner feels it is appropriate to begin grazing). See comments below in the grazing table matrix concerning use of absolute dates as sideboards

While there is adequate water in the Williams pasture to begin the grazing system in 2007, an existing water source will need to be improved and repaired during the 2007 grazing season, \$5,000 estimated cost to MFWP. There is also a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile section of existing boundary fence that is in poor condition and requires replacement, approximately \$10,000 estimated cost to MFWP. Both estimated costs are in addition to the cost for MFWP as related to the purchase of the conservation easement.

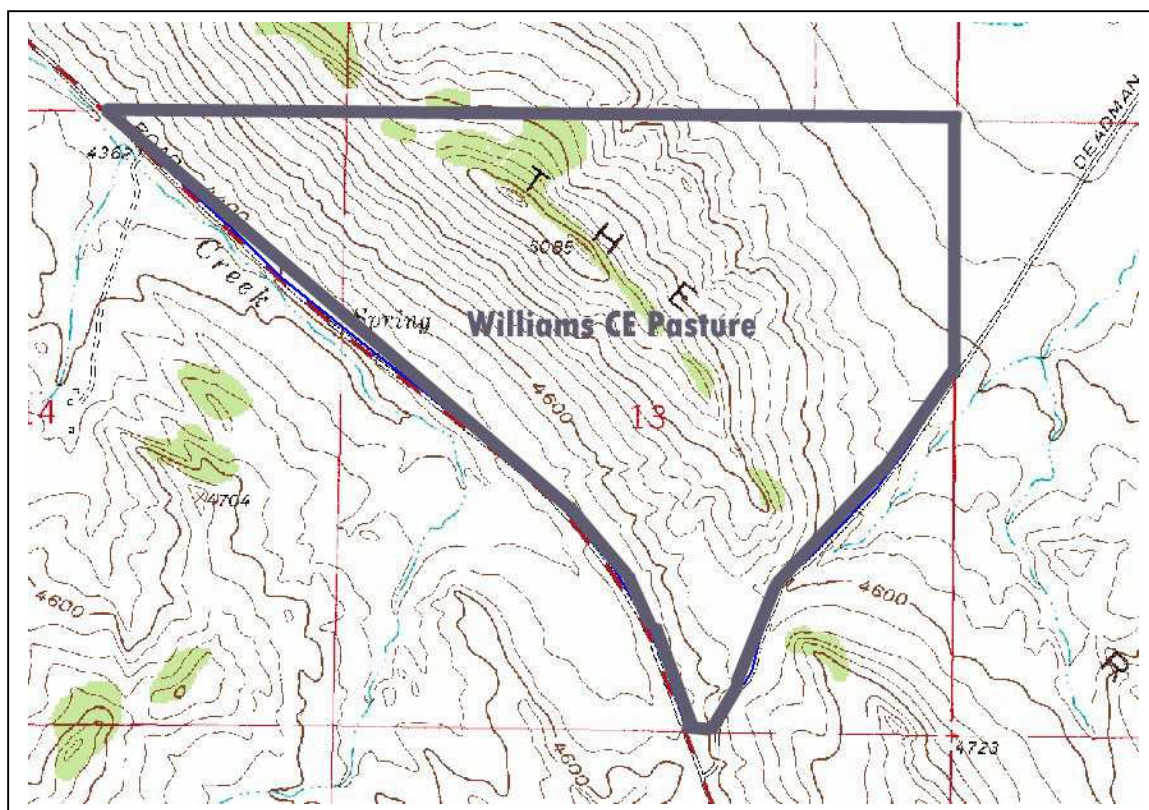


Figure 2. Williams Conservation Easement livestock grazing pasture.

Table 1. Grazing rotation schedule for the Williams Ranch conservation easement pasture (shown in the period 2008 through 2028).

Year (Grazing Season)	<sup>2</sup> Grazing Treatment
2008	A
2009	B
2010	C
2011	A
2012	B
2013	C
2014	A
2015	B
2016	C
2017	A
2018	B
2019	C
2020	A
2021	B
2022	C
2023	A
2024	B
2025	C
2026	A
2027	B
2028	C

<sup>1</sup>In 2028 and beyond the rotation will repeat after each subsequent rotation

<sup>2</sup>A = Livestock grazing from mid or late June (no earlier than 15 June) to seedripe, early August (no later than 7 August)

B = Livestock grazing from seedripe, early August (no earlier than 1 August) to September 30.

C = Rest from all livestock grazing

## DEFINITIONS:

1. **SUSTAINED RAPID PLANT GROWTH:** Period of rapid and continuous green growth usually initiating about mid-May. This does not refer to first green-up conditions that may intermittently start and stop depending upon weather and moisture conditions earlier in spring.
2. **SEED RIPE:** That time of seed maturation for the latest of those plants of interest based upon climax grassland habitat type (rough fescue/*Festuca scabrella*, bluebunch wheatgrass/*Agropyron spicatum*, Idaho fescue/*Festuca idahoensis*). Usually occurs early to

mid-August.

3. **LIVESTOCK:** All age and sex classes of cattle and not more than four (4) horses. Other types of livestock (goats, sheep, etc.) would require management plan review and adjustment.
4. **HAY:** Supplemental forage to include previously cut and stored grass, alfalfa, grain or other crop. This shall not include mineral or protein supplements.

**WILLIAMS RANCH**  
**CONSERVATION EASEMENT**  
**SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT**

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:  
Rob Brooks  
December, 2006

## I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when land is acquired for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the purchase of a conservation easement on property currently owned by the Williams Ranch. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed conservation easement.

## II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

### A. Property Description

The Williams property is located in Lewis and Clark County about 10 miles north of Wolf Creek adjacent to State Highway 434. This property is mostly open grasslands with scattered parcels of Douglas fir.

### B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

As mentioned a large part of the easement acres are open grassland, part of the intermountain grassland habitat identified by Habitat Montana as needing protection. The Williams property supports wintering mule deer and elk and a host of other species that depend on the intermountain grassland complex.

### C. Current Use

The Williams property is a working cattle ranch. The acreage under consideration for the conservation easement does not contain any buildings or other structures other than fencing and water improvements for livestock. There are no agriculture crops being cultivated on these acres.

### D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Purchase a conservation easement on the property by MFWP
- 2) No purchase

## **MFWP Purchase of Conservation Easement**

The intent of the Williams Ranch conservation easement is to protect and enhance the wildlife habitat currently found on the property while maintaining the agricultural character of the property. In addition, since there is no public land adjacent to this property and the fact it connects two other parcels of private land under a conservation easement, this easement will enhance public access to the wildlife resources this area supports. A complete list of the restrictions this easement has on the landowners and MFWP is provided in the Deed of Conservation Easement.

## **No Purchase Alternative**

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if MFWP does not purchase a conservation easement.

Subdivision or development of the land is a possibility. Public hunting opportunities are limited in this area and would most likely remain so under the no purchase alternative. The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been calculated.

## **III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS**

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The purchase of a conservation easement will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, keep the land in private ownership and provide for public access for hunting. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the conservation easement to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

### **A. Financial Impacts**

The financial impacts on MFWP are related to the purchase price of the conservation easement and maintenance/management costs. The Williams Ranch Conservation Easement will cost

MFWP \$ 64,800. These dollars are provided through the Habitat Montana Program, which is funded by sportsman's license dollars. Maintenance/management costs related to the easement are associated with monitoring the property to insure the easement terms are being followed (initial costs of approximately \$15,000 for fence and water improvements, this is in addition to the \$64,800 cost).

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the purchase of the conservation easement. The easement, considered separately, will not change the type or level of use on the property. Therefore, the purchase of a conservation easement on this land will have no impact on the current level of taxes paid to Lewis and Clark County.

### **B. Economic Impacts**

The purchase of a conservation easement will not affect the agricultural activities on the Williams Ranch nor on these acres specifically. The number of cattle run on the property will not change however a rest rotation grazing system will be implemented under the terms of the conservation easement. It is anticipated that the fencing and other materials needed will cost about \$15,000, which will provide a small positive impact to local businesses providing these materials.

The easement will provide public access for hunting. The number of hunters and number of days will be defined in the easement terms.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The conservation easement will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural integrity of the land, and ensure public hunting opportunities.

The purchase of a conservation easement by MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Lewis and Clark County.

The agricultural/ranching operations will continue at their current levels. The financial impacts of the easement on local businesses will be neutral to slightly positive in both the short and long run.